

Bitter nostalgia: social redundancy in Irvine Welsh's 'Kingdom of Fife'

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BITTER NOSTALGIA:
SOCIAL REDUNDANCY IN IRVINE WELSH'S
"KINGDOM OF FIFE"

Alex Law and Eddie Rocks

"Ya hoor, sor". So Irvine Welsh opens his long short story, "Kingdom of Fife", in the anthology, *If You Liked School, You'll Love Work* (2007). "Kingdom" is a demented, Rabelaisian tale of the post-strike wasteland set in the central Fife ex-mining town, Cowdenbeath. From a once mighty industrial *Gemeinschaft* defined by proletarian struggle and austere autodidacts, post-strike Cowdenbeath is pictured by Welsh as a ruined post-industrial landscape—"The hale high street's as deid as a Tel Aviv disco flair" (2007, 205). Pubs and betting shops are among the few survivals of post-strike decline; "The toon might have seen better days but the high street supports plenty a waterin holes" (2007, 210). In this dreich environment, daily life is experienced as a long, drawn out struggle against tedium:

"So ah take that long walk past the auld Soviet-style building ay the now renamed Miners' Welfare Institute. Aye, the Iron Curtain came doon in Central Fife as much as it did in East Europe and the frozen winds ay the marketplace huv been blastin us since. In capitalist development wir much mair along the Bulgarian-Rumanian lines, thin the likes ay the Czech Republic or any ay the new trendy Baltic States. Mair cappuccino outlets in Tallinn or Riga thin Central Fife I'll wager."

(Welsh 2007, 233)

Class desolation relies on more than the topographical description of Cowdenbeath as the ruined habitat of a lost tribe. Welsh's main character, Jason King, son of an ex-miner, is the embodiment of a class engulfed by grievous loss. Incapable of finding a secure foothold in the class structure, Jason drifts aimlessly into a series of short-lived, dead end jobs—failed jockey, casual horse groomer, dog walker and cross-dresser—and refuses to settle into regular employment or make career plans. As a ne'er-do-well,

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tragi-comic king for a defunct class, Jason couldn't be further removed from romantic clichés about militant Fife miners; of upright, heroic communist-proletarians transcending inhuman conditions through collective struggle.

Geographically isolated, Fife mining towns like Cowdenbeath, Lumphinans, Kelty, Cardenden and Lochgelly were forced back onto their own resources and developed a militant collective temperament that supported a distinctively communist political culture rare in Britain (Durrant 1904; Holman 1941, 1952; Macintyre 1980). In Welsh's "Kingdom", a strong sense of militant parochialism pits the class essence of Fife against the rest of Scotland (let alone England). This identification with Fife ranges from Adam Smith to "Little Moscow" pit villages and International Brigade volunteers. As the alcoholic ex-Church of Scotland minister Jakey Anstruther sermonises:

"Think about this coonty, a place that gied the world capitalism, and yit wis one of ay the first places to realise thit capitalism wis shite and steadfastly opposed it. For mair than thin any ay they Weegie¹ chancers wi thir Paddy-teuchter pish, or they snobby English connivin Embra² hoors, this coonty is a microcosm ay the true spirit ay Scotland."

(Welsh 2007, 327)

Roused by his own oratory and tonic wine, the ex-minister appeals to a different God, one that will redeem the true class essence of Fife and, with it, universal humanity:

"*Ma God* is seek tae fuck ay hearin the same voices; askin um fir a new car or hoose or speedboat, or tae endorse another fuckin barbaric war fir eyl! ... *Ma God* wants a bit ay a fuckin change, n eh wants tae hear fae somebody whae wants nowt in return except they wee things we cry liberty, justice n equality!"

(Welsh 2007, 327)

But instead of universal class interests, parochial identity is magnified, setting principled Cowdenbeath against nearby "revisionist" Dunfermline: "Fuckin Dunfermline: the capital ay Vichy Fife" (Welsh 2007, 304). Even Jason's technique in table football is "oot ay time", trapped in a "purist" working class commitment to the out-dated "Fife style of play". Unprincipled, win-at-all-costs, neoliberal Subbuteo is supported only by "quisling hoors" and call-centre supervisors who "spout the doctrine ay wur ain Adam Smith as corrupted by yon Nazi Hayek cunt n that English Thatcher hoor" (2007, 236).

Any socio-analysis of fiction runs the risk of taking an objectivist sledgehammer to the enchanted spell of the perceptible literary effect (see

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Bourdieu 1996). In courting this risk we offer the alibi that socio-analysis of Welsh's "Kingdom of Fife" intensifies and enriches the truth of social suffering since the strike. Literary transgressions and inversions of the sort produced by Welsh both express and veil the structure of damaged social space, its constraints and possibilities, as the contradictory consequences of defeat.³

Militant Fife

Part of the force of Welsh's story is that it breaks through the sedimentation of group memory to locate the common resources of refusal before they disappear completely from collective consciousness. Welsh's recovery of collective memory prevents tragedy from descending into melancholia. It rescues "the hidden injuries of class" from the anaesthesia applied by heritage culture (Dicks 2008). A bitter nostalgia pervades the story for the better people created by a rapidly disappearing structure of feeling and ways of being (Halbwachs 1992). The catastrophic defeat of the 1984-5 strike forced mining communities to formulate what they were fighting for; what exactly was of value in their way of life that such collective suffering could be endured in its name (Najam 1990; Corrigan *et al* 1986; Maxwell 1994).

It is often assumed that mining villages were homogenous, highly regulated and deeply integrated communities (Campbell 2000). Village life was subject to daily routines: of the pit, the family, the neighbourhood, the miners' welfare club, producing a deeply felt collective ethos in all its social, cultural and political aspects. Deeply ingrained in routines and habits, this ethos rarely needed to be made explicit. Collective assumptions were exposed only after they were shattered by the external shock of the strike and pit closure.

Welsh repeatedly locates socialist sentiments and Marxist phrases as the taken-for-granted lexicon of Jason's milieu, albeit one of declining currency. Until fairly recently, Communist influence over local politics in Fife was deeply entrenched. It was no idle boast when leading Fife Communist Alex Maxwell pointed to the extent of Party authority across the coalfield at the time of the strike:

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“Communist presence therefore was very strong at each level of authority in the Strike organisation—Scottish, Fife and Cowdenbeath—and was to exert decisive influence on how the strike was conducted, how public support for the miners was sustained, and helps explain the failure of the Coal Board to get the return to work they were achieving elsewhere.”

(Maxwell 1994, 40)

Communist hegemony in Fife had its origins in the early twentieth century syndicalism and socialism of local miners. Under Communist leadership Fife miners battled with the right wing leadership for control of the union. During the General Strike in 1926, Fife miners set up Councils of Action to organise pickets, and a paramilitary Workers Defence Corps to protect pickets from police attack (Moffat 1965; Flynn 1978; Macintyre 1980; MacDougall 1981). Communists increasingly exerted local hegemony, culminating in 1935 when the West Fife coalfield elected Britain’s first Communist Party MP, Willie Gallacher.

Defeat in 1926, as later in 1984-5, was calamitous. Despite widespread victimisation of militants, the Communist Party strengthened its position locally through its network of organised activists (Arnot 1955; Campbell 2000). During the worst years of unemployment communists mobilised vast Fife contingents of the National Unemployed Workers Movement. In the post-war period, Fife miners were instrumental in the successful 1972 and 1974 national strikes, helping wipe away collective memories of the 1926 defeat.

However, the Fife coalfield was not entirely dominated by the Communist Party. Before the 1920s a Cowdenbeath branch of the Anarchist Communist League, led by the French syndicalist Lawrence Storione, influenced young militant miners who would later become committed communists (Moffat 1965, 28; Macintyre 1980, 54). Fife also had a strong reformist right wing tradition in the local Labour Party and, on occasion, produced independent socialist movements like the Fife Socialist League led by Lawrence Daly.⁴ Against fierce political opposition, Daly broke with the Party in 1956 and founded the New Left’s only proletarian organisation in Britain (Daly 1959; Thornton and Thompson 1997). By 1984, Communist Party influence over local and Scottish National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) leadership was found by some militants to be an old-fashioned bureaucratic force urging moderation and restraint (Brotherstone and Pirani 2005; Stewart 2006; Phillips 2009). Union officials in Fife were thought by some to be less willing to sanction independent initiatives and militant forms of direct

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action, than Scottish pits that lacked Communist influence like Polmaise in Stirlingshire (McCormack 1989; Brotherstone and Pirani 2005).

Against the bureaucratic routinisation of coalfield industrial relations some sociologists identify deep-seated continuities in local historical myths about the invincibility of industrial militancy. Such “outmoded tactics and attitudes” among Fife miners “laid the ground for their greatest defeat”; “during the course of the strike their [militant] reputation greatly outweighed the reality [and] placed the radical identity under severe strain” (Najam 1990, 150). In 1984 there were far fewer pits in Fife, and miners were more geographically dispersed across the county. With the number of miners and pits drastically reduced and the relationship between workplace and community severed, the objective substratum for communal solidarity in villages densely and exclusively populated by miners no longer existed. In these conditions, Fife miners were “beguiled by past visions of strength, they had failed to see a disjuncture between the fixed nature of the radical discourse and the changing nature of reality” (Najam 1990, 162).

However, a more dispersed morphology of Fife miners had not prevented successful militant action ten years earlier, in 1972 and 1974. Moreover, the relationship between pit, union and community continued to create overlapping densities of militancy. Of those miners registered at the Cowdenbeath Strike Centre in 1984 most lived in the town, or in the nearby villages of Lochgelly, Cardenden, Kelty and Lumphinans (Maxwell 1994, 181-183). In any case, political radicalism cannot be reduced to collective myths alone. Militancy varies across mining communities and depends on many factors, including the attitude of employers, gender relations, ethnic and religious divisions, national politics, and local employment structures. Not reified myths, but mutually overlapping networks of family, workplace, class and neighbourhood vie with each other to determine collective consciousness.

Formed out of the push and pull of multivalent forces, the present is never a mythical replica of the past. In the Fife coalfield, collective memory did not simply recuperate reified mythical history but formed a moral relationship to the past from the standpoint of the present. As the most divisive post-war struggle experienced by British society, the strike represented a period of remarkable intensity in the collective life of Fife miners. In the intense social lacerations and effervescence of the strike, individuals came to personify collective memory. This lingered on in the embodied dispositions and perceptions of individuals, long after the specific historical conditions that gave rise to coalfield militancy disappeared.

Militant Nostalgia

The desolate legacy of the miners' strike cuts through every element of Welsh's story. Jason's middle class girlfriend, Jenni, comes from "new money" made in 1984 when her father, local hard man Tom Cahill, organised scab lorries from his haulage business. Jason's hapless introduction to Cahill is only defused by pit humour.

"One ay the boys wis sayin something about Kelty n of course ah couldnae keep ma big mooth shut. Ah goes, 'Ya hoor ye, only hoors an miners come fae Kelty'. So big Tom Cahill, this Jenni lassie's faither, he looks at me aw hard n goes, 'Ma wife comes fae Kelty'. Weel, sor, ah says tae um, whit pit does she work in?"

(Welsh 2007, 240)

King represents a dispossessed faction of waged labour. His only escape is flight into the carnivalesque realm of the fantastic, seasoned with the grotesque. With little scope for measuring up to the proletarian masculinity of even the recent past, small, seemingly trivial, victories are stolen in sex, masturbation, language, violence, macabre decapitations, alcohol, poetry—and table football.

Jason's father (and aficionado of gangsta rap), "the auld boy" Alan King, provides the story's Quixotic thread to traditional working class militancy. Never seriously active but now personally isolated and politically impotent in the absence of solidary class structures, the auld boy finds solace in nostalgia for the recent past when history remained to be written.

"Aye, the seventies, Great times, then along came that English hoor n fucked it aw up. Its aw fur the rich now, the whole fuckin country."

(Welsh 2007, 243)

Nostalgia exerts an overwhelming claim on King senior. The past signifies personal survival of an acute trauma at a stage in the life-course when his character corresponded more fully with the collective standpoint of the social group.

"That faraway world where we remember that we suffered nevertheless exercises an incomprehensible attraction on the person who has survived it and who seem to think he has left there the best part of himself, which he tries to recapture."

(Halbwachs 1992, 49)

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This feeling that part of King senior's better self was left behind becomes more pronounced, as collective memory corrodes under drastically changed conditions. Nostalgia allows the auld boy an unofficial, hidden opposition to the present. In taking the measure of the present from the past, hope is entertained that things might be different but also that they will probably deteriorate further.

Compared to the past perfect, the signs of corruption and class betrayal are everywhere nowadays. Even Tony Blair's facial features are a sign of readiness to service the class enemy: "That's nivir a Labour man, no wi a mooth like thon. That's a hoors mooth thon" (Welsh 2007, 243). Bizarre conspiracies are cooked up by the auld boy; for instance, that the corrupt local council have trained cats to rip open bin liners so that they can introduce wheelie bins manufactured by the business partner of a local councillor. Even Arthur Scargill, the arch-communist "enemy within", falls some way short of the lost militant ideal:

"But ah blame Scargill, should've goat a fuckin mob doon they Hooses ay Parliament, torn it apart brick by brick and stoned every yin ay they public-skill cunts tae death wae the rubble."

(Welsh 2007, 244)

Everything is filtered through the trauma of class defeat. When Tom Cahill (*gangster*, not *gangsta*) offers Jason some stablework caring for Jenni's horses, the auld boy responds: "Thir's nae employment that's stable right now, the hoor says, totally missin mah drift—No fur the workin class at any rate" (2007, 283).

Jason finds the auld boy's nostalgia for the militancy of the past tiresome and threadbare. He recognises that, unlike the last generation of Fife miners, he is structurally disempowered, unable to invest much in the serious adult games of politics and collective action. From a social position of advanced marginality, his father cannot help but feel ambivalent toward his son's own ambivalence. As Bourdieu noted of the divided paternal *habitus*:

"At one and the same time he says: be like me, act like me, but be different, go away. His entire existence is carried in a dual injunction: succeed, change, and move into the middle class; and stay simple, don't be proud, stick close to little guys (to me). He cannot want his son to identify with his own position and dispositions, and yet all his behaviour works continuously to reproduce that identification, in particular the body language that contributes so powerfully to fashioning the whole manner of being, that is, the *habitus*."

(Bourdieu 1999, 510)

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Habitus is never more divided against itself than in the storms and stresses of family dynamics. The auld boy works himself into a rage when Jason rejects political action and taunts him that people sometimes just want to “chill out”:

“—So what’s the answer then? Drink, drugs, the chippy n mair Tory rule? The cornerstones ay your life?”

“—Ah’m no sayin that.”

“—Defeatist talk, son, ... That’s the problem wi your generation, nae collective consciousness! Ye should be doon that library fillin yir heid wi political n social education soas yi’ll be well placed to take advantage when the upturn comes! The likes ay Willie Gallagher [sic] and Auld Bob Selkirk wid be turning in thir graves!”

(Welsh 2007, 244)

Jason’s only response is a putdown that old communists like Gallacher and Selkirk would hardly tolerate the auld boy’s fondness for gangsta rap music as the authentic voice of proletarian rebellion.

King of Fife

Far from experiencing social weightlessness, Jason carries over his father’s sense of working class intransigence into the minutiae of a post-industrial environment where proletarian militancy lacks an effective social base. His ambiguous position in social space is determined by the magnetic pull of repulsion and attraction, bounded, on the one hand, by the drift of social trajectory and, on the other, by the dispositions of social origin. Down to the last generation, Jason’s social trajectory would have been structured by the world of coalmining, an entire social universe where position-taking was fixed firmly in place. Without this Jason feels something of a sociological monstrosity, drifting from one temporary position after another, unemployed ex-jockey, sometime paid stablehand, dog walker, or cross-dresser for hire.

Despite never having worked in a pit, Jason is deeply conditioned by a mining habitus. As Bourdieu put it, “the inheritance inherits the heir” (1996: 11). But for the sons of miners without mines the rules of succession are far from unproblematic. Pit life placed a considerable load on the equalising value of male camaraderie. Reciprocity, mutuality, and solidarity are moral qualities through which the pit community actualised itself. Jason’s temperament, conditioned by this socio-genesis, is cut adrift from the industrial field in which it once operated as a social force.

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Throughout, this class inheritance exerts an inertial drag on Jason's trajectory, even though he appears to be free-floating in social space. To have lived through or participated in the intense experience of the miners' strike retains a powerful meaning for ordering individual narratives about the life-course. On the other hand, this has generational effects that are less pronounced and more gratuitous for younger groups who only encountered the collective effervescence and social lacerations of the strike second-hand.

In literary work a lack of social determination can be more apparent than real. Welsh both veils and expresses the most complete form of economic determination: social redundancy. Jason belongs to a surplus population without determinate economic shape or function. A tenuous relationship to the labour market conditions the reproduction of surplus labour. Typical forms of regular employment in Welsh's story—call centre supervisor or rail ticket collector—are judged inferior to the lost male world of coalmining.

It is not that Jason lacks resolution or conviction. He simply has no interest in worldly success and refuses to play the game. As a “failure” forced to submit to social redundancy, Jason fulfils the unconscious desire of his father:

“It is as if the father's position set a line not to be crossed, a line which, once internalized, becomes a kind of prohibition against dissent, against setting oneself apart, against rejection or breaking away.”

(Bourdieu 1999, 510)

Inured by a lack of economic capital, he seeks social recognition in non-economic games—competitive table football and poetry reading. These continue to draw from the inheritance of locally approved forms of cultural currency; “the Fife style of play”. If these games are played with serious intent and in keeping with the socially approved form and style, it contrasts markedly with Jason's lack of investment in worldly success. This represents a realistic adjustment to the objective possibilities of social space. Jason refuses to commit the error of mis-recognising reality and serving impossible illusions.

This lament for the lost essence of proletarian greatness, destroyed with the defeat of the strike in 1985, echoes down through the post-industrial meaninglessness of the present. In this context, the auld boy draws the lesson from Alan Sillitoe's *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* (1959), of a point-blank refusal to play the bosses' game as the only existential choice open to Jason:

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“Whin the odds are stacked against ye, optin oot ay the system is the only way. Like the boy in the book that won yon race but refused to cross the line. The ultimate rebellion ...”

(Welsh 2007, 354)

Unlike the internal exile of the personality undergone by Sillitoe’s anti-hero, Jason elects for real world exile in Spain.

Similarly, when Jason wins a table football competition he forfeits the game to his opponent, de-legitimizing worldly authority’s right to make awards and pronounce winners and losers. It also restores a temporary equilibrium across the internally divided paternal habitus:

“Guilty of betrayal if he succeeds, he is guilty of disappointing if he fails. The traitor must restore (justice to) his father: whence the allegiance to the cause of the father (our interviews attest, for example, that certain forms of membership in the Communist Party are inspired by a search for a reconciliation with an imaginary people, fictitiously found within the party); and certain kinds of behaviour (and not only political) can be understood as attempts magically to neutralize the effects of change in position and disposition separating the individual from his father and from his peers (‘you can’t stand us anymore’). Fidelity to these political positions strives to compensate for the impossibility of completely identifying with a dominated father.”

(Bourdieu 1999, 510-11)

His father fancifully compares Jason’s minor act of refusal to John Maclean’s speech at his 1918 trial for sedition—“pittin authoritarian structures oan trial in their ain fuckin coort”—and makes the absurdist claim that Jason somehow represents, “The very spirit we need to turn yon so-cried Kingdom into the fully-fledged Soviet Socialist People’s Republic it wis destined to become!”(Welsh 2007, 372). Jason’s symbolic gesture of defiance and escape inverts the historical possibilities represented by the miners’ strike; that the neoliberal order could have been strangled at birth. Against the futility of the present, Jason escapes from a daily reality that falls well short of socialist utopia.

Only by refusing to play the game is collective memory gratified. With the disappearance of the structure provided by the pit, the economic world has been upended. Dislocation of the industrial militant habitus produces a “Don Quixote effect” in Jason. Habitus, a product of history, is betrayed by history. Unable to follow a smooth trajectory through social space, Jason is condemned to be “oot ay time”. Experiencing what Bourdieu calls “the hysteresis effect”, a time lag is felt by a habitus that no longer corresponds to current realities. Yet the hysteresis effect need not be fatalistic:

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“The tendency of groups to persist in their ways, due inter alia to the fact that they are composed of individuals with durable dispositions that can outlive the economic and social conditions in which they were produced, can be the source of misadaptation as well as adaptation, revolt as well as resignation.”

(Bourdieu 1990, 62)

With the meaning and purpose once provided by industrial life gone, market success has less value for Jason than social recognition. Clowning, abuse, quick wit, ribaldry, word play, and macabre humour enliven the monotony and ensure social success. As in the Rabelaisian underworld, conventional authority is uncrowned by the vulgarised currency of the clown: “The king’s attributes are turned upside down in the clown; he is king of a world “turned inside out” (Bakhtin 1984, 370). By cleaving to debased forms of refusal, the loser miraculously takes it all. Jason, the errant fool, becomes King.

Literary Stakes

Welsh’s “Kingdom” is no romantic panegyric to a lost way of life. In the adventures of Jason it condenses “all the complexity of a structure and a history which scientific analysis must laboriously unfold and deploy” (Bourdieu 1996, 24). Although few direct references are made to the strike, it serves as the absent presence of collective memory, revealed while being veiled, the return of the repressed. Grotesque realism speaks of the constraints of the social world almost as if they do not exist, as if they are null and void, and circumstances could be leaped over by sheer willpower alone. Yet Welsh produces the effect of a grotesque dialectic; at once objectifying social facts, so as not to deny external constraints, but also to effect a creative rupture with obdurate realism, so as not to succumb to them.

Just as poverty is often veiled as rejected riches, social necessity is always in danger of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is far easier for Jason to stand aloof from worldly success when he has already been spurned. By making virtue out of necessity it is easy to forget that social redundancy is an ascribed condition, not one that characters like Jason freely choose. Welsh never fails to situate Jason in the social fact of external necessity.

As if to underscore the gap between the militant ideal of Fife miners and post-industrial social redundancy, Welsh adds an afterword that uncharacteristically separates authorial intentions from the reality of the place.

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“When you write about places such as Cowdenbeath, and you come from a physically wee (but spiritually vast) country like Scotland, you have the responsibility to emphasise that this is not meant to depict the ‘real’ place, but rather the ‘Cowdenbeath’ of my imagination at the particular time of writing.”

(Welsh 2007, 391)

In order to protect a place already subjected to hostile external forces, Welsh puts “Cowdenbeath” beyond explanation. His “Cowdenbeath” appears to be the outpouring of a singular creative act without referent in the world itself. The “purity” of Jason’s refusal echoes the “purity” of the author’s imagination. Despite a clear identification with Cowdenbeath, Welsh effects an authorial distance from the calamity visited on the place by the defeat of the strike. This is why the ravaged Fife coalfield is an ambiguous site: the more that its socialist destiny is proclaimed the more remote it is in reality; the more that parochial defiance is expressed, the more that physical and mental escape from local suffocation offer the only way out.

Notes

¹ “Weegie”: Glaswegian

² “Embra”: Edinburgh

³ Particular thanks are owed to Professor Phil Taylor for sharing his extensive knowledge of literature over a glass of black gold.

⁴ Daly later became General Secretary of the NUM between 1968 and 1984.

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